

Begorra! Leapin Leprechauns at the SC State Museum!

By Tut Underwood

Quick! What was that? Was it the sun glinting off a leaf? A frog hopping behind a rock? Or was it one of the “wee folk”?

It seems a touch of Irish folklore has snuck into the South Carolina State Museum in Columbia and hidden in the background murals of exhibits on the cultural history, natural history and science floors—whether it’s March or not!

The tiny leprechauns are the creations of Kent Pendleton, an artist who created background murals for several of the museum’s exhibits prior to its opening in October 1988.

Though the mites—some call them elves, others gnomes, but to museum staffers they’re leprechauns—are popular, Pendleton says it all came about by accident.

“I was painting two or three murals for what is now the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and for some reason I got the idea of putting a little guy way back in the painting,” said Pendleton, who lives and works in Colorado. “No one could see him, and no one was intended to see him. It was like a private joke.

“But one day a volunteer spotted it while I was working and said I should put one in another mural. So I did. Pretty soon the word got out, and it wasn’t a secret anymore,” Pendleton said. “It got so popular that it has totally amazed me. I did a couple more for the Denver Museum and continued to do them in work for others. The word spread, and now I get requests for it. I feel almost obliged to do them, although I don’t mind.”

Pendleton did more of the gnomes for the State Museum than for any other, and on occasion, the museum does informal tours of the murals. Museum goers looking for the unusual can find the little people in permanent exhibits on the museum’s three upper floors. All told, there are nine of the little guys—six on the natural history floor, one on the science and technology floor and another two on the cultural

history floor. They can be found in all kinds of locations and situations, from a river-bottom swamp to the surface of the moon! They are engaged in a variety of activities as well, from gathering water from a waterfall to taking a nap.

Since the museum’s opening in 1988, the little guys have intrigued guests who learned of their presence from a docent, staff member or word of mouth.

“They’re just like his signature or his trademark, his creative outlet,” says Mike Fey, the museum’s exhibits director. “His murals are outstanding enough, but this just adds a little extra that most people don’t know about.”

The leprechauns are cleverly camouflaged by their surroundings in each painting. It takes a close look to find them, but that’s the idea with leprechauns, isn’t it?

“The figures are out in the open, even obvious if you know where to look, but it takes most people awhile to find them,” adds Fey. “But once they see them, they never forget where they are.”

Guests often turn the search for the wee images into a competition and feel a sense of triumph when they find them, especially when they beat mom or dad, sister or brother in the discovery.

They may not bring the finder a pot o’ gold, but these colorful sprites add a special brightness to an already special visit.

The State Museum is housed in the historic Columbia Mills Building, the world’s first totally electrically powered textile mill when it opened in 1894. Throughout the museum’s galleries are exhibits on Palmetto State art, history, natural history and science. As the Southeast’s largest and most comprehensive museum, it’s “South Carolina Under One Roof.”

Find out more in *Places...*

Turn to page 104 in the “green pages” for more on the SC State Museum.



Look closely at the moon’s surface, and you might find a hitchhiker sitting near the Lunar Lander, a playful addition by mural artist Kent Pendleton.



“Find the Leprechaun” is a favorite game of visitors to the SC State Museum.

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